

12405 SUSSEX LANE (HOUSE)
(The Rancher)
(The Buckingham)
Belair at Bowie, Maryland
Bowie
Prince George's County
Maryland

HABS MD-1269
MD-1269

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
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HABS No. MD-1269

NOTE: Please see the following historical reports for additional information about the history of Belair at Bowie, Maryland:

Belair at Bowie, Maryland (overview)	HABS No. MD-1253
12418 Stonehaven Lane (The Cape Cod)	HABS No. MD-1254
12420 Stonehaven Lane (The Cape Cod)	HABS No. MD-1255
12408 Stonehaven Lane (The Rancher)	HABS No. MD-1257
12500 Swirl Lane (The Colonial, 4 bedroom)	HABS No. MD-1260
12100 Tulip Grove Drive (The Rancher)	HABS No. MD-1263
12400 Shadow Lane (The Colonial, 3 bedroom)	HABS No. MD-1264
Belair Bath & Tennis Club	HABS No. MD-1265
12401 Sussex Lane (The Manor House)	HABS No. MD-1267
12413 Salem Lane (The Country Clubber)	HABS No. MD-1270
12406 Skylark Lane (The Country Clubber)	HABS No. MD-1271

Location: 12405 Sussex Lane, "Belair at Bowie, Maryland," Bowie, Prince Georges County, Maryland.

Significance: The house at 12405 Sussex Lane was one of twelve houses, and three Rancher variations, constructed between 1960 and 1967 on Sussex Drive as display models at the sales and exhibit center for Belair at Bowie, Maryland. Number 12405 was one of the eight finished by Levitt and Sons in 1960 to open the development.¹ The display models line the south side of the street, facing north across a grassed park in full view of MD Route 450, which, at the time, was one of the major east-west arteries between Washington and Annapolis. The gable- and hip-roofed variations of the original Rancher were retired as options when the model was redesigned in 1962 and an example built on Sussex Lane. It is not known how the house at number 12405 and its gable-roofed counterpart were used by Levitt and Sons after this time; however, as they were located at the sales and exhibit center, it is unlikely they were sold for residential occupancy, along with the other models, before completion of Belair's single-family sections in 1968.

¹ The houses were periodically updated on their interiors not only to freshen rooms subject to visitation by tens of thousands of prospective buyers and curious locals, but also to highlight changes, usually upgrades, in the standard finishes and equipment available in new Belair houses. The other four furnished display models on Sussex Lane were the redesigned Rancher, The Devon, a Colonial with the double-garage option, and The Kensington.

Historian: James A. Jacobs, HABS

Description: Except for the roof type over the front-wing (gable or hip) of The Rancher and the location of decorative embellishments, both of the two original variations shared identical plans, massing, and overall exterior organization. The L-shaped perimeter of the house can be roughly divided into similarly-sized thirds, with two arms extending outward at right angles from a central core. The external form of the two original façade variations, however, suggests a more dynamic three-dimensional composition—a rectangular main block turned with its short side to the street with a set-back wing extending to one side. This skillful effect was accomplished using standard design conventions. The roof pitch over the main block is steeper than that over the wing, which not only gives that portion of the roof greater mass, but also a more prominent ridgeline. This already dominant portion of the roof extends clear to the rear, ultimately covering two-thirds of the house. In addition to the roof, the overall presence of the side-facing wing is further reduced by a covered front porch scooped out of its mass.

The main block is also aggrandized by choices in cladding materials and applied decoration. Because of its L-shaped form, The Rancher is the only house at Belair having two perpendicular exterior walls that were treated as “public” in character. In order to keep costs down, Levitt and Sons limited to the façade the more expensive sheathing materials and architectural decoration, which give the houses their neo-colonial or neo-traditional “look.” Except for the use of shutters on the side-wall windows in some model variations, the rear and side walls of the Belair houses were essentially unadorned and utilitarian—clad in simple, colored asbestos shingles and exhibiting little of the symmetry or formal balance employed in organizing the street elevation.

Because the front door of The Rancher is set back from the street in the crux of the L, the front wall and the one on the main block paralleling the entrance drive are both treated as the façade. For the house at number 12405, these two walls are sheathed in brick and the front corners of the wing are articulated with simple wooden pilasters in the Doric Order. These give the illusion of support for the hip roof. The windows on both of these walls have shutters, as does the small window under the entrance porch near the front door and a flower box extends across the front of the wing under the windows. In contrast to the masonry of the main block façade(s), the front wall of the side-facing wing is sheathed in asbestos panels. The secondary character of the side-facing wing to the main block provides an interesting, if inadvertent, link to historical precedent. Although the front door is located within the porch carved out of the wing, the remainder mostly contains the “work” areas of the house—the kitchen, laundry, mechanical equipment, and garage—in a manner not unlike the service wings common to older American houses.

History: The Rancher was the only direct carryover of an earlier model in Levitt and Sons 1961 product line used to open Belair.² The firm previously approached one-story

² The 1961 product line was also used in new sections of Levittown, New Jersey, where the number of marketed models increased from the original three (a one-story, a one-and-one-half story, and a two-story) to six (The Rancher, The Cape Cod, three- and four-bedroom versions of The Colonial—each with a distinct front elevation, and two luxury models: The Country Clubber and The Manor House).

models with caution because their comparative cost per square foot was greater than similarly-sized multistory houses; however the company could not entirely ignore the American obsession with one-story “ranch” houses and the easy, casual, family-oriented lifestyle popularly associated with them. The company half-heartedly acknowledged the market potential in 1949 with the Rancher version of its New York Cape Cod, which was followed by a three-year experiment with thousands of single-story Levittowners in Pennsylvania.³ Levitt and Sons devised a one-story model known initially as House B for its New Jersey subdivision, which opened in 1958. The model’s contribution to a more varied streetscape was probably its most compelling attribute. House B sold poorly and within a year was replaced by an entirely new one-story model that Levitt and Sons developed for both New Jersey and for the new development being planned for the Maryland exurbs, or outermost suburbs, of Washington.⁴

In contrast to its immediate predecessor, the new Rancher model quickly became a favorite among buyers. For the exterior of the L-shaped house, the company created two traditional facade variations, one with a gable roof facing front and one with a hip roof. Eighteen months after opening sales at Belair, Levitt eliminated the hip-roofed version and refined the other by lowering the roof pitch and lining-up the ridges of the two wings, and cladding some of the exterior in sandstone and “hand-split shingles.”⁵

The Rancher’s low-slung profile and conventional neo-colonial detailing on its street elevation presented a blandly appealing face to prospective buyers, masking an undeniably modern interior that incorporated many of the latest planning trends for domestic space and was fully equipped with a full range of appliances and mechanical systems (fig. 1). As found in all of Belair’s houses, The Rancher provided an integral garage, a separate laundry area with standard washing machine and matching clothes dryer, and, most notably, whole house central air conditioning—a luxury at the time expected only in the most expensive new houses.⁶ With central air conditioning and laundry equipment offered in all models, most prospective buyers were likely satisfied with kitchens that came equipped with only a stove and refrigerator; only the two highest priced models featured dishwashers and in-sink garbage disposers. Still, the kitchens in

³ For a full discussion of Levittown, New York, models, see Barbara M. Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); for an overview of Levittown, Pennsylvania, see “Technology: The Most House for the Money,” *Fortune* 46 (Oct. 1952): 150-56+.

⁴ “Look How Bill Levitt Is Meeting the Changing Market: More House, More Money, More Value,” *House & Home* 16 (Sep. 1959): 138-143, for one-story model redesign. Levitt and Sons had been planning Belair since late in 1957 and the firm would have had both markets in mind with the design of what became known as The Rancher.

⁵ For revamped model, see: “Unveiled by Levitt,” *Washington Post* 3 Mar. 1962, sec. D: 7, and “New Rancher Popular at Belair,” *Washington Post* 31 Mar. 1962, sec. D: 7.

⁶ Levitt and Sons, Inc., “Belair at Bowie, Maryland,” 1962, for information about included features and amenities. In author’s collection.

all of the models were efficiently arranged with U-shaped layouts and nearly all included provisions for casual dining within or adjacent to the kitchen's work area, a feature fast becoming indispensable to middle-class buyers.

In addition to a large, equipped kitchen, a front door that did not open directly into the living room, a clearly-defined "formal" dining area, and a second full bathroom topped the list of consumer desires at the time that Levitt and Sons was devising the Belair models. All of these elements were found in the Rancher and contributed to its popularity among buyers. The Rancher's L-shaped plan was also well-organized with the three bedrooms occupying one wing that was buffered from the most active areas of the house (kitchen, laundry, garage) by the entry hall and formal living and dining rooms, which are situated at the house's center.

In 1963, the *Washington Post* reported that The Cape Cod and The Rancher were the "two most popular houses" at Belair.⁷ Strong sales of The Rancher likely spurred the creation of an expanded variation called The Devon, which Levitt and Sons began offering in 1964. The Devon was, at its core, a Rancher that had been enlarged with the insertion of a standalone family room between the garage and the kitchen.⁸

Selected Bibliography:

"Bill Levitt's Third Big Town: More Value for Less Money." *House & Home* 80 (Aug. 1958): 72-85.

"Cape Cod, Rancher Popular at Belair." *The Washington Post* 14 Sep. 1963. Sec. D: 16.

Levitt and Sons, Inc. "Belair at Bowie, Maryland." 1962.

"Look How Bill Levitt Is Meeting the Changing Market: More House, More Money, More Value." *House & Home* 16 (Sep. 1959): 138-143.

"New Levitt Model." *The Washington Post* 13 May 1967. Sec. C: 34.

"New Rambler Shown at Belair." *The Washington Post* 6 Jun. 1964. Sec. E: 21.

"New Rancher Popular at Belair." *The Washington Post* 31 Mar. 1962. Sec. D: 7.

⁷ "Cape Cod, Rancher Popular at Belair," *Washington Post* 14 Sep. 1963, sec. D: 16.

⁸ "Ranch Model Is Enlarged," *The Washington Post* 21 Mar. 1964, sec. E: 11; "New Rambler Shown at Belair," *The Washington Post* 6 Jun. 1964, sec. E: 21. In 1967, Levitt and Sons began offering another, more modest, new one-story model "intended to attract newly married couples and people of retirement age." It was smaller than The Rancher and contained within a compact, rectangular footprint. Despite its size, it competed well with the other models because of its generous front-facing portico. A furnished display house was constructed at the exhibit and sales center on Sussex Drive. "New Levitt Model," *The Washington Post* 13 May 1967, sec. C: 34.

“Ranch Model Is Enlarged.” The Washington Post 21 Mar. 1964. Sec. E: 11.

“Unveiled by Levitt.” The Washington Post 3 Mar. 1962. Sec. D: 7.

Project Information:

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APPENDIX A: ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1. The Rancher model, floor plan, 1964. The plan for the house at 12405 Sussex Lane was slightly different from the one depicted above, which exhibits some of the changes made to The Rancher between 1960 and 1964. As originally designed, the laundry was located in the large walk-in closet between the main entry and the dining room. The rear of the garage was later partitioned-off and the laundry relocated there along with the heating equipment, which was formerly positioned in a closet in the bedroom wing. In its early form, The Rancher's bathrooms were oriented so that both had exterior windows; repositioning the bathrooms and eliminating the hall closet with the furnace allowed for a larger master bedroom and provided greater privacy for the bathrooms. Author's collection.